Totalized Compassion: 
The (Im)Possibilities for Acting out of 
Compassion in the Rhetoric of Hannah Arendt

Matthew J. Newcomb

The accusation here is fundamental: that in making ethical judgment the central function of intellectual life, and its chief claim of authority, Arendt had lacked the one essential feature of judgment: compassion. [...] the worst that can be said of her, is that if she lacked compassion, she did so in the best of all possible intellectual causes: to refuse anyone, even victims, the right to evade their responsibility.

—Michael Ignatieff

Modern times and antiquity agree on one point: both regard compassion as something totally natural, as inescapable to man as, say, fear. [...] Because they so clearly recognized the affective nature of compassion, which can overcome us like fear without our being able to fend it off, the ancients regarded the most compassionate person as no more entitled to be called the best than the most fearful [...] should human beings be so shabby that they are incapable of acting humanly unless spurred and as it were compelled by their own pain when they see others suffer?

—Hannah Arendt

Michael Ignatieff, in a speech given in 2003 as he received a prize named for Hannah Arendt, claims (in the first epigraph above) that a lack of compassion was Arendt’s chief flaw—and that it limited her possibilities for ethical judgment rather than enabling those possibilities. Ignatieff, as have others in less kind ways, dismisses Arendt’s views on compassion

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without a thorough analysis. Much of the controversy around the term “compassion” for Arendt is a response to her report on Adolf Eichmann’s trial. In that report she showed little compassion for Jews who aided in the administration of the Nazi regime’s movements of Jews. She says, “Without Jewish help in administrative and police work—the final rounding up of Jews in Berlin was, as I have mentioned, done entirely by Jewish police—there would have been either complete chaos or an impossibly severe drain on German manpower. [...] To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story” (Eichmann 117). Arendt’s response was seen by many as quite severe toward her fellow Jews, even disloyal. The reaction to her few pages about the Jewish leadership in Nazi Germany was loud and polarized. It helped create a reputation that she was not compassionate—and her writings remained consistent on the theme of the dangers of compassion.

Compassion—generally understood as a feeling of sympathy for the suffering of another, with a desire to alleviate that other’s suffering—is certainly a valued concept (and feeling) in the contemporary world of humanitarian aid and intervention (which Ignatieff writes about and is involved in). From that humanitarian world, in January, 2005, I received a letter from an organization called Compassion International. The letter requested my help for children in poverty, based on the seemingly reasonable human assumption that “your heart breaks along with mine [Wes Stafford, the President of Compassion and signer of the letter] when you consider how extreme poverty can devastate the life of a little child” (Stafford). The entire project of this religiously affiliated organization involves helping with social and material needs of children based on the actions that compassion (as the name emphasizes) can inspire. This connection between compassion and some sort of aid activity appears to work too—as “last year, over 15,000 children were sponsored” based on a single-day event that they advertised in the letter (Stafford).

That same month, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) sent me (and thousands of others, of course) a letter updating recipients on the work being done in Asia after the earthquake and tsunami of December, 2004. The cover letter, which was given some celebrity status by having Paul Newman’s name and signature on it, makes the plea:
So if you have ever been moved by the plight of refugees who share our basic humanity—but not the same sense of security—and wondered what you could do to help them, I urge you to join me in supporting the International Rescue Committee.

There are moments in all our lives when a decision to act with compassion in response to immense tragedy takes the measure of our humanity. Refugee crises in so many parts of our troubled world make this one of those times. (Newman 2; emphasis added)

The IRC firmly joins action to compassion in this letter, as do many aid and relief organizations—whether governmental or non-governmental, religious or secular, based in one country or international. Most of the action requested is to donate money, but requests for political letters or changes in one’s view of policies are often connected to compassion as well. Even in a world where rapidly shifting media attention, the needs of powerful governments, and historical ties between places impact aid to those who are suffering, compassion is often uncritically assumed to be the best basis to get responses. Throughout this exploration of Arendt’s work on compassion, more contemporary work on compassion, and the role of compassion in the writing classroom, I constantly call for a more critical form of compassion. Compassion can lead to imaginative connections between people when it is not a totalizing concept or sole basis for relationship.

Certainly, compassion is a relevant issue in composition studies. Lauren Berlant’s edited volume entitled Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion even includes “Suffering and Thinking: The Scandal of Tone in Eichmann in Jerusalem” about Arendt. In it Deborah Nelson argues that Arendt’s apparent coldness is philosophical—not just a personality trait, and she says that Arendt is concerned with keeping thought central in all situations. Does compassion take away thought or critical work? Many of the other articles in Berlant’s volume (including the introduction) critique “compassionate conservatism” and the appropriation of compassion for the middle-class or businesspeople, and away from those helped by social service programs. Here, “compassion” is the basis for a great deal of thought, but the ease of using the term compassion to make help for businesses (for example) seem necessary fits with Arendt’s concerns. These studies are rightly concerned with the direction
and employment of compassion, while Arendt critiques compassion as a concept—particularly in the public realm. I believe compassion can still do valuable work, but Arendt’s perspective can make us more careful about the deployment of compassion at all—toward any object or person.

The assumed connection between compassion and action—even with the often-corresponding feelings that no action is adequate in responding to suffering—is questioned at theoretical and practical levels in the work of Arendt. Her famous (or infamous) views against compassion’s possibilities in the public realm and for action are portrayed in the second epigraph above. Compassion is something that overcomes a person, so that one cannot choose to act with initiative and reason. Compassion is a determining force that does not make a person better or more human than others, and it makes appropriate action (which for her is often speech) unavailable to a person truly feeling compassion. In this article, I provide an analysis of Arendt’s critique of compassion and put it into the context of the role of compassion in the composition classroom. While I argue with her definition of compassion, I believe she has a valuable critique of it that can be turned to critical focus on feelings in general in the classroom.

My pedagogical focus is not on compassion between the teacher and students or between one student and another, but is rather on the role of compassion for teacher and students when writing and talking about the pain, trauma, and suffering of others. I argue that, ultimately, Arendt’s critique of compassion, as she defines the term, is useful for pushing writers and instructors to alternative motives for helping others (beyond personal feelings of sympathy or pain). However, I also argue that her definition of compassion is too either/or; it does not allow for the mixed feelings and motives that are always prevalent in compositions related to the suffering or needs of others. I will then link my study of Arendt to current work on compassion and will provide a short description of a first-year composition course I taught with a theme of “The Rhetoric of Suffering and Service.” Through that class, I provide examples of some of the possibilities for work on compassion to influence critical thinking and writing, and I consider some of the dangers or risks of such a course. Ultimately, Arendt’s view of compassion criticizes it in principle, rather
than particular versions of compassion (as with most current work), but also includes the seeds for other-centered (as opposed to self-centered) political action.

### Arendt’s Critique of Compassion

In one of the most thorough studies of Arendt’s view of compassion, George Kateb notes, “The treatment of compassion (feeling for the suffering of the person one can see) and pity (a general emotion of sorrow at the suffering of the many) is one of the most intricate and yet one of the most disturbing segments in Arendt’s work” (28). Kateb says that this disturbing topic needs a response, and like most critics, he tends toward a defense of compassion. Kateb observes,

> Obviously a long and patient answer is needed to Arendt’s indictment. The most insidious element in it is that compassion and pity express self-interest. [. . .] How does one respond? One can certainly acknowledge the general point; namely, that there is likely to be impurity in any deep human emotion or sentiment and ambiguity in any strong one. This acknowledgment also cuts the other way: Every ostensibly unlovely or hateful emotion or sentiment has something forgivable in it. (94)

While suggesting that compassion according to Arendt is a form of self-interest, Kateb goes on to provide an analysis of her view of compassion. Self-interest, for Arendt, involves the private realm, not the public realm where matters truly in common for all are debated. For her, compassion involves completely feeling with another, so any actions taken based on that pain are based on pain that you or I feel. Compassionate action is then strictly self-interested. Like Kateb, I believe Arendt’s understanding of compassion deserves attention, and I also think it provides useful critiques of some cultural objects (like aid organizations) and can be extended into a valuable pre-political experience in its own right.

I argue that Arendt’s main reasons for de-valuing compassion in the public sphere are the intertwined issues of compassion’s destruction of necessary space and boundaries between individuals, its tendency toward silence rather than speech, and its failure to provide thoughtful motiva-
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Jennifer Ring is another critic who tries to recover political aspects of compassion in Arendt. She notes that, unlike pity, "Compassion has Arendt's respect"; however, "neither passion (compassion) nor sentiment (pity) belong in the political arena because both are inaccessible to public light, not really communicable in terms of speech or reason" (447–48). Ring reads Arendt as one who equalizes politics. When no issue, such as poverty, trumps all else, then the common sense of all, even the poor, can be used in public and political ways (448). Ring's reading seems to leave out Arendt's repeated emphasis that politics and public life are only possible for those who have their material needs met, but she remains consistent with Arendt's view of compassion as valuable only in private.

To understand the role of compassion in Arendt, compassion must be put in relationship to pity. Arendt discusses compassion and pity around the character of Jesus in Dostoevski's work, and Jesus is one of the figures she has in mind when formulating a definition of compassion. Compassion, according to Arendt in On Revolution, is initiated by the suffering of another individual, not by a group. Pity is what happens when one removes the individuality of others and has feelings for the group as a whole. Dostoevski's Grand Inquisitor depersonalized the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate—the people toujours malheureux, the suffering masses, et cetera. To Dostoevski, the sign of Jesus's divinity clearly was his ability to have compassion with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some such entity as one suffering mankind. The greatness of the story, apart from its theological implications, lies in that we are made to feel how false the idealistic, high-flown phrases of the most exquisite pity sound the moment they are confronted with compassion. (85)
In this analysis of the Grand Inquisitor, compassion retains the positive attribute of seeing individuals separately, while pity lumps them into an inchoate whole. Pity can speak, unlike compassion, but only in false ways that hide the actual stories suffering individuals might have. In Arendt’s critique, Jesus’ compassion may be commendable on a private level, but when combined with the otherworldly emphasis in Christianity, it fails to provide the basis for any public action or change in this world. In fact, it may prevent people from taking real actions toward freedom. This totalized notion of compassion destroys the space between people that allows them to act with freedom. In the classroom, students that feel a totalized connection to a particular group or ideology have difficulty discussing anything potentially critical of that affiliation. Talking about critical compassion is a way to consider the ties themselves, still keeping the feelings of connection valuable, but sometimes creating the space for more independent action.

Connected to the destruction of spaces between people is the silence that comes with compassion. Arendt values continual speech, for, in that, new directions can be taken and memory is preserved. A vibrant public space is full of debate and disclosure. The silence of compassion, says Arendt, prevents it from making effective change in the world:

[T]alkative and argumentative interest in the world is entirely alien to compassion, which is directed solely and with passionate intensity, towards suffering man himself; compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world. As a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out weirsome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processed of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence. (On 86–87)

Compassion and politics are not in the same realm in On Revolution. Changing conditions to ease suffering only happens through speech—through a very agonistic form of speech in this quotation. Feelings of compassion, which prevent one from diminishing suffering by speaking
it aloud, cannot bear this sort of debate. The extremism of compassion for Arendt stands out, as compromise is no longer a possibility when one feels compassion. Again, this is a view of compassion as an extreme or all-encompassing feeling, which it rarely is. Letting the potential extremeness of compassion stand out in the classroom can be the basis for more political discussion that understands the varying roles that strong feelings of sympathy have. Even the radical differences in how compassion is defined or where it is directed can come out when critical attention is paid to students’ moments of compassion in their writing.

The possibilities for redeeming and even needing compassion in Arendt’s logic lie in showing how partial and full of compromise compassion almost always already is. Arendt argues that where speech begins, compassion ends, for one is no longer completely consumed by the feelings of another and by necessary reactions to those feelings. In Arendt’s formulation, compassion creates silences. Talking may still happen, but real political speech where people can exchange ideas about the common good can no longer happen. Political speech is a form of action for Arendt, so compassion also limits action. Real action is defined by its freedom, and because compassion makes responses to the pain of others necessary, no real political action happens either. Discussing the various objects of compassion—just from the students in one class—may lead to significant political discussion about common (and disparate) values.

In Arendt’s understanding, compassion by definition includes silence and reactive or necessary responses. When discussing Jesus’ compassion in Dostoyevsky’s story of the Grand Inquisitor, Arendt asserts, “Passion and compassion are not speechless, but their language consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words. It is because he listens to the Grand Inquisitor’s speech with compassion, and not for lack of arguments, that Jesus remains silent, struck, as it were, by the suffering which lay behind the easy flow of his opponent’s great monologue” (86). Intelligibility disappears when totalizing compassion comes on the scene. Arendt’s critique of compassion can stand alone, but is part of her larger critique of all forms of totalitarianism. Compassion can have a value with individuals in private settings, but Arendt is
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interested in public spaces, and for her this silence is devastating to public spaces in the same manner as a totalitarian governmental regime.

While Arendt’s compassion maintains the individuality of people more than pity does, its silence takes away the human distinctions. Seyla Benhabib notes this importance of individuality, saying, “in the case of humans, the distinctness of individuals from one another is revealed through speech. […] Speech differentiates action from mere behavior” (32–33). Speech is not just noise, but is language used in the public sphere toward common goods. Here the aid organizations step into the picture again as an example. Compassion might make one donate money, but this is not any real sort of speech or action in Arendt’s system of definitions. It is an almost automatic human response to a stimulus, but it fails to create any new conditions or actions, any change in the world, or any relationships or spaces for freedom. Arendt strongly indicates the reality that occasional acts of giving may help a few people or may assuage some feelings of guilt, fear, or compassion, but they leave situations fundamentally the same. Suffering and compassionate responses remain. Suffering, for Arendt, is a constant thing. It is to have something happen to you and is tied to doing. She claims the actor “is never merely a ‘doer’ but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings” (Human 190). In this rendition, suffering is normalized in comparison to the crisis language about many cases of war, poverty, or natural disaster. Putting suffering on a continuum of things that happen after actions runs the risk of creating situations to compare or rank pain, but it also allows suffering to be talked about without separating people as distinctly into actors and sufferers. It also can demystify suffering enough to make issues related to it objects of speech, even if speech cannot fully represent someone’s pain.

Arendt, however, would rather not spend her time talking about suffering. She says, “It seems evident that sharing joy is absolutely superior in this respect to sharing suffering. Gladness, not sadness, is talkative, and truly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says” (Men 23). When the goal is to continue talking, as it often is for Arendt, who sees public speech as a key to preventing totalitarianism,
suffering has little place. Her goal could make one even more interested in limiting suffering, rather than just avoiding talk about it. Sharing joy and friendship attempts to create a basis for relationships with others based not on compassion, but on something with more distance and more equality.

For Arendt, one preferred basis for action is friendship. Friendship can act for others based on a more classical notion of virtue. Virtue is full of speech and debate, while compassion for Arendt retains that “curious muteness or, at least, awkwardness with words that, in contrast to the eloquence of virtue, is the sign of goodness, as it is the sign of compassion in contrast to the loquacity of pity” (On 85). Compassion’s silence leads, together with its ability to destroy spaces between people, to Arendt’s third major critique of compassion: its close relation to necessity rather than to action.

**Motivation and Action**

Compassion has been used as a motivation for action in many cases of suffering, and the need for it as a motivator, as we have already seen, is one way that recent scholars have critiqued Arendt. Motives in this sense are reasons for individuals or groups to freely choose to take a particular course of action. Arendt makes clear that she believes compassion leads to no choices (free or not) to any sort of action. Compassion may make people give money, or even say particular things, but these are compelled by the situation of feeling with someone suffering. In this sense, compassion is a tyrant. Arendt describes compassion as a motive: “Compassion [...] for the first time became the central motive of the revolutionary in Robespierre. Ever since, compassion has remained inseparably and unmistakably part of the history of European revolutions. Now compassion is unquestionably a natural, creature affect which involuntarily touches every normal person at the sight of suffering” (Men 21–22; emphasis added). As a motive, compassion is involuntary. It creates further behavior or movement, so one can use the word *motive* for compassion, but because compassion is involuntary, it is not a basis for action. It is something that happens to a person and causes further reactions unless
something interrupts that sequence (such as no longer feeling compassion). Arendt notes how compassion was used as a motivation to try to bring unity or solidarity to all, but she says it fails to really unite, even as it creates terror when trying to “improve the lot of the unfortunate rather than to establish justice for all” (Men 22). Seeking justice, rather than seeking to help others, results in a better society in Arendt’s analysis.

Compassion as a motive in Arendt is inextricably intertwined with the qualities of selfishness and selflessness. Above I have noted Arendt’s reversal of compassion, saying it can often be selfish rather than selfless, because it bases any response on what one feels. Her critique of Rousseau continues on this front, as she contends that he was trying to find a way to unify the nation internally, needed a common enemy to do it, and “his solution was that such an enemy existed within the breast of each citizen, namely, in his particular will and interest” (On 77). If a selfish will is the enemy, then selflessness is good. Arendt rejects this view on two fronts, both by calling Rousseau’s beloved compassion a selfish thing, and by asserting the importance of citizens freely asserting themselves and their differences in public situations.

The public sphere is the only space where freedom and action can take place anyway for Arendt. She says, “The realm of the polis, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres (public and private), it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life” (Human 30). Anything to do with necessities of life was “a prepolitical phenomenon” (31). Compassion, which is frequently a response to missing necessities, becomes automatically prepolitical. Her formulation depends on a fairly strong line between the private and public (and social), between the political and prepolitical, without allowing for much crossover. I believe that compassion has possibilities as a motive for action when someone feels compassion at one point, but rather than becoming consumed and compelled to necessary action by it, takes it with him or her to the political arena.

Liberty, similar to freedom, is the escape from ties to necessity—often to material needs. Arendt states, “Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempt to liberate himself from necessity” (Human 121). All are tied to necessity to some degree, so liberty is always
partial, but extending Arendt’s logic, she suggests that people can gain the liberty from physical suffering, food needs, shelter, and so on. for moments of political action. One who feels compassion has even lost liberty as he or she truly feels the needs of another. The question Arendt does not address as much is what traces of that compassion or togetherness are left when the connection is gone. She values memory very highly, and the category of memory may allow moments of compassion to be used for valuable political actions later. Action then might be not from one’s own pain (per the critique from Cicero earlier), but could have a more detached virtue.

Arendt gives at least one good example of this more political type of response to human suffering. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she tells the story of the German leadership during WWII asking the Danish government to use yellow badges for marking Jews. In response, the Germans were simply told that the King would be the first to wear it, and the Danish government officials were careful to point out that anti-Jewish measures of any sort would cause their own immediate resignation. It was decisive in this whole matter that the Germans did not even succeed in introducing the vitally important distinction between native Danes of Jewish origin, of whom there were about sixty-four hundred, and the fourteen hundred German Jewish refugees who had found asylum in the country prior to the war and who now had been declared stateless by the German government. (171–72)

This act might fall under Arendt’s category of solidarity, where one decides in a deliberative space to act in a way that shows togetherness with others, rather than responding by feeling the suffering of others (and not acting). Arendt analyzes the event by claiming it was a political act, not one of compassion, which was “the result of an authentically political sense, an inbred comprehension of the requirements and responsibilities of citizenship and independence” (179). She favorably quotes Leni Yahil as saying, “for the Danes [...] the Jewish question was a political and not a humanitarian question” (179). While responses to material needs should not be in the political realm by Arendt’s formulation, responses to the suffering of others in connection with liberty should perhaps be made political issues, rather than moments of compassion.
Arendt’s critique of compassion shows the complex relationships between silence, spaces between people, and motivations for action to show that issues of freedom should be made political and deliberative. She argues for the dangers of extremities: sentiments and issues that trump all other concerns. Her critique suggests that questions of material needs might best be addressed as they relate to the conditions for freedom, and it coolly but convincingly shows the importance of distance between humans. While her critiques are important, we are still left dealing with the fact of compassion (a common and uncontrollable human response according to her) and its role in so many discussions of action for others. One still wonders with Kateb what motives might bring about aid for others, when a general human decency that Arendt refers to seems to come up so short. In the following section, I give one possibility of how Arendt’s understanding of compassion might be extended to allow compassion to have a useful role even in political spaces, while keeping Arendt’s powerful critiques in mind.

**Compassion’s Uses**

Compassion, as we have seen, cannot be political in any good sense according to Arendt’s definitions. However, when compassion is not all-consuming, when it is a reaction that turns into a memory to bring to politics, it may have value. Bonnie Honig uses Nancy Fraser’s work to say that for Arendt, “it is simply the case that nothing is ontologically protected from politicization, that nothing is necessarily or naturally or ontologically not political. The distinction between public and private is seen as the performative product of political struggle, hard-won and always temporary” (147). While this is an open view of Arendt’s politics, it is consistent with her work and responds to the difficulty of saying what can be talked about politically according to Arendt. Suffering or compassion or anything else is not necessarily anti-political. Rather, those topics tend to force the kinds of reactions that destroy political spaces between people. As compassion removes spaces between people, it is not political. However, if there were a sort of suffering or response to it that maintained spaces between people and possibilities for equal discussion based on
principles, then that response could be political—and therefore could lead to real action.

How, then, could compassion maintain or use spaces between people for positive action? One answer lies in the purity or impurity of compassion. Arendt critiques the French Revolution leaders for not being able to completely fit in or connect with the people. She says about feeling with others, "it soon became evident that this kind of humanitarianism, whose purest form is a privilege of the pariah, is not transmissible and cannot be easily acquired by those who do not belong among the pariahs" (*Men* 22). A person cannot be completely at one with someone else through compassion, yet that is central to Arendt's critique of compassion. Compassion's problem is that as one feels what another does, one responds to his or her own pain in a necessary manner. The space between people that disappears with compassion never fully disappears. A greater problem may lie in the disconnection between what someone suffering feels and what the compassionate person feels. If compassion cannot remove all space between people, it may just need to maintain an awareness of its own impurity—its own individuality of feeling and situation. Compassion is always only one response among many occurring simultaneously and cannot become as all-consuming as much of Arendt's critique makes it out to be. Here Kateb's critique that Arendt gives compassion more power for evil than it really has sounds quite appropriate. When compassion is known to be limited and impure in matching the feelings of another, it can become a conscious act of imagination (an attribute valued greatly by Arendt) that feels alongside another, but never fully identifies with that other.

Arendt uses compassion as a way of naming a situation, because for her purposes, compassion describes the failures of certain kinds of feelings well. I think it still has good possibilities for describing situations, but it needs to be used as a partial motivator because of the economically and ethically divided categories it tends to force people into when connected to donating to relief efforts (only the rich can be good). Aid organizations then could still reasonably use compassion as a motivating tool sometimes, but should integrate other motivators as well. They could make a case for how political work and aid in a natural disaster situation can create conditions for freedom, or how it can better one's own
political spaces in a “donor nation,” or even could write about what would be required for real political interaction with the suffering people being shown. Addressing conditions for principles like freedom, friendship, and dialogue can imply longer-term relationships and goals beyond the immediate material needs. Compassion can still be included as one of several motivators in a situation, but using other principles frequently helps complicate the positions people are placed in. One might no longer be just a recipient or donor.

Composition and Compassion

So what does Arendt have to do with composition? Speech and freedom for action are two desirable goals for composition students. Too often instructors have a sense that the language of papers is just reproduced based on close affiliations the students have with particular groups or ideologies. Compassion can limit thought and real speech (in an Arendtian sense) in the classroom. However, *JAC*’s special double-issue on trauma is one example of some positive possibilities for compassion as well—once it is taken as a partial connection to others. In one article, Ross Chambers argues that in teaching testimonials (often related to AIDS), “what one is doing is attempting to raise, and to develop, one’s students’ capacity for hospitality toward experiences of reading that they may well find disturbing and alien” (395). He wants students to learn to read with an ethic of long-term hospitality toward the text. Robert Samuels notes Cathy Caruth’s important work on trauma and claims, “Trauma pushes us to rethink our conceptions of history and reference so that we take into account the radical temporal distinctions between an event and its representation” (448). Samuels nudges students toward a “dialogic interplay between subjectivity and culture,” which encourages students to see how their reactions to texts (on the Holocaust in his example) are culturally constructed, while maintaining a tension with the value of knowing actual historical events (464). Chambers and Samuels see texts about trauma as having a powerful place in the classroom for teaching students to read ethically, critically, and receptively toward others.
My look at compassion contributes to the above discussion and to other work on affective rhetoric (see Edbauer for example). Most of my first-year composition students in the Fall of 2005 had their first month of high school marked by the September 11 attacks, and had the middle of their senior year interrupted by the South Asian tsunami. In many cases, the students (and I) thought about responses in terms of how the traumas touched our lives or according to how we could identify with them. Arendt’s critique of compassion suspends the focus on identifying with others, and it asks for action that has long-term goals of freedom and space for political conversation continually in mind. What is needed is a critical compassion.

Students can already have more critical moments when thinking about compassion. I now explore a variety of student perspectives on compassion as they reflect Arendt and show the value of critical compassion. David was one of the students in a “Rhetoric of Suffering” course I taught. When responding to a prompt about the role of compassion, he had both positive and negative things to say about compassion:

Compassion is the reason why people help each other blindly. If people did not have the ability to sympathize with others without being able to fully empathize with them the world would be far worse off. Imagine a world where the only people that helped others were people that have actually gone through the experience. Human nature is to be sympathetic with those that are suffering. Imagination is really the idea that leads to compassion when dealing with distant suffering. [. . .] On the other hand the realization that there is so much suffering in the world often makes people callous to their humane emotions. (December 1)

For Jason, compassion for those distant from you cannot happen without powerful acts of the imagination. Compassion seems to be a valuable force in motivating people to act, and he says it can make people “help each other blindly.” This blindness suggests the need for more thoughtful approaches to action, perhaps in a situation where a person feels compassion for many others.

Another student, Janise, also presents compassion as a feeling that motivates action, or at least ought to:
Compassion plays a big role in suffering because one can help stop the other. When people feel compassion for a situation of suffering—for example, Hurricane Katrina—they choose to step forward and apply their compassion in the form of aid and donations. When a person can feel sympathy, they are more willing to give to the cause at hand and therefore stop the suffering. While this sounds simple enough it is a bit difficult. It is a challenge to portray a story in such a way so as to help people identify with a situation.

These students assume that compassion leads to action. The problem is one of identifying with another, of not being close enough, rather than being too close. Arendt can help teachers address issues of emotion and action. She has an explanation for why compassion does not always create effective response. Janise says that people need to “identify with a situation,” which can be different than identifying with another person. Having a connection to a situation has the potential to keep enough difference between people that some choice for action remains. Perhaps we should consider this distance from another person or situation on a spectrum rather than as an either/or situation.

Does compassion actually silence our students, as Arendt might argue? Many of mine noted an inability to act—often because they did not know what to do about a particular situation, other times because of guilt, but also because they felt the pain of others enough that they were simply overwhelmed. However, actually donating time, money, or words through one of those motivations is not action according to Arendt. It would be a movement of necessity. Perhaps maintaining enough distance for choices to act is vital for effective responses.

How then do students understand compassion and how do they value it as a motivating factor in responding to moments of (distant) suffering? In Issue 2, 2005 of Politics and Culture, an online journal edited by Amitava Kumar and Michael Ryan, all the articles are devoted to responses to the south Asian tsunami of December 2004. The first section consists of academic articles about economic or cultural ramifications of the tsunami and responses to it. The second part consists entirely of responses from undergraduate students. All those students were in the same class, which pitted Hollywood depictions of culture against more
critical versions of what the world is like. They were asked to write a response to the tsunami for that class. The section the undergraduate articles appear in is titled “The Cynicism of the American Undergraduate” and includes a variety of responses. What is perhaps most notable is the variety of connections and references students make—for example, to Hiroshima, to Disney, to Bill Gates, to Ikea, to Jet Li, to 9/11, to the Holocaust, to The Day After Tomorrow, and to many other cultural objects. These students use the variety of references to describe their own feelings about the tsunami and end up providing their own critiques of compassion. These acts of critical compassion can make new feelings and actions possible.

One student-writer, Avi Nocella, in “Indian Ocean” asks why do we have to be “deeply affected by every ounce of human suffering, or every dewdrop of joy for that matter? Our emotional responses to tragedy and suffering and celebration are our own. Morality enters in perhaps only when it comes to our outward responses—those that affect others.” Nocella attempts to go beyond the need for feeling with others and asks for action based on other motivations. On the other hand, Kandace Bowens argues that (unfortunately, according to her) it is Hollywood celebrities that really influence our feelings and pocket books. “What helps us to pour out our hearts and wallets is when the news hollywoodizes a disaster by telling us all the famous people that were involved or hurt in some way. For the recent tsunami it was model Petra Nemcova, photographer Simon Atlee, and actor Jet Li.” Compassion as a sense of feeling with someone is critiqued for who people are directed to feel with. The goal of such compassion can border closely on being connected to celebrities to extend Bowens’ critique. Bowens’ work provides an opportunity for her to consider her own compassionate connections as well—and how totalizing (or not) they may be.

Assignments like this one provide students the opportunity to approach composition in global analytic terms and provide chances to teach skills of critical compassion that are important in a world where affective labor has become more and more powerful. Students can better learn to analyze what shapes their own feelings, and they can think of creative alternatives for finding new affective connections to others, particularly those in need.
In the Fall of 2005, I taught an honors first-year writing course with the theme “The Rhetoric of Suffering.” In her final weekly journal response in that course, Beth described an interaction with another student about what English classes they were in:

From a typical first-month-of-college conversation:

“What’s your English class about?”
“Animals, animal rights. Yours?”
“Suffering.”
(awkward silence) “Seriously?”

Or...

“What’s the topic for your English 30 class?”
“Love, work, and values. What about you?”
“Suffering.”
(laughter) “You’re just asking for depression, aren’t you?”

Luckily, I haven’t become depressed because of the subject of this English class. . . . In actuality, more than grateful, this class has made me ashamed and embarrassed to a certain degree for having been ignorant about events that happened in my lifetime. . . . Overall, taking this class has made me a more informed person.

(December 6)

I am certainly grateful that the class did not make Beth depressed. I am not so sure about the shame and embarrassment, however. Past the laughter about the notion of a class about suffering, feelings were central to this course. I attempted to keep my students’ feelings in mind regularly, not intentionally inducing guilt and attempting to be respectful of the pain of others without keeping everything dark. However, shame at the lack of knowledge they had was a common response from students. This is not a response that most students have in a physics class. Not knowing things is expected. My students also did not seem to feel shame about composition issues or skills that they did not know about—and these were at least as important to the course as the suffering-related topics we studied. It is not uncommon among teachers to hope that students will undergo some sort of positive change during a semester. So I wonder what changes my students underwent during this course. Specifically, what ways to
analyze their own feelings and "do" critical compassion did they end up with by the end of the course?

I asked my students about their own identities and changes in their affective responses to distant suffering—often focusing on a specific case like the Rwandan genocide, apartheid in South Africa, or Hurricane Katrina. Along with a greater feeling of privilege, they portray themselves with the identity and feelings of failed helpers—sometimes of their own fault and sometimes not. Some also took to playing roles in papers, creating their own complex affective responses that depict others in terms that go beyond simply as sufferers. These acts of role-playing were sometimes problematic, as students put themselves in the position of people whose cultures and pain they could not know well. However, the students playing roles escaped some of the guilt and futility of the others, and seemed more prepared to act in ways beyond just analyzing their own complex responses. Compassion played an important role in many of these responses. Below I quote some fairly large segments from a number of student responses or papers in order to show some of the applications of Arendt to thinking about compassion in the classroom.

Doug describes his position and the difficulty it causes for him to have strong feelings about distant suffering. He describes a need for a personal connection or personal experience that fits with the situations being described:

In our position as, on average, middle-class college students, much of the suffering that we come into contact with is very much removed from our position in life. There are undoubtedly some exceptions, but the vast majority of us cannot associate with starving, having no place to live, disease, war, or widespread discrimination. We can hear about these atrocities all day long, and as much "stuff" as we may know about them, we cannot become closely, emotionally involved with the situation. It's not that some of us wouldn't want to, it's just that it's almost impossible to be empathetic, when we have no relationship with those ideas. ("Journal 10")

Doug suggests that identity and economic position is an almost unsurpassable boundary. He presents a close emotional involvement as an implied goal or form of connection. What he does not address is the
possibility of imaginative connections that do not involve empathy and compassion so much. Arendt calls for a connection based on mutual goals and the common public concerns citizens can have. Doug has a good critique of empathy and is quite astute about the importance of imagination. Arendt, however, would say that the imaginative energies should not go toward linking identities, but rather should go toward finding points of common interest to work on together. Doug goes on to say,

In every book that we have read this year, one of the main tasks of the authors whose works were more poignant seemed to be trying to bring these issues to a level where the average human being can begin to associate with the feelings and thoughts of those actually involved. Beginning with Gourevitch, these authors would use a method of zooming in from the huge overarching perspective of a situation to specific cases of individual persons. This was done because it is much easier to understand the suffering of one rather than the suffering of millions.

He focuses on the individual connection, but he notices the variety of scopes used to depict distant suffering. His emphasis on the individual level for compassion fits with Arendt's understanding as well. However, that individual focus again makes his own feelings central to the situation of suffering—precisely one of Arendt's concerns.

Another student, Heather, reports a changed sense of understanding how the media shapes her feelings and responses. She presents a slightly different sense of futility than Doug does. She takes a bit more personal responsibility for her lack of actions, while beginning to understand other forces shaping her feelings. Heather confesses,

Perhaps I am being lazy or have a very negative view of the world, but I believe suffering will always take place. It's easy for me to say that and hardly be affected because I'm not suffering and I'm not in a place where civil war or being tortured could occur. Certainly, if I was suffering I would have to believe that it could be stopped because if I didn't what would there be to live for? [...] I have great ambitions of going to foreign countries and helping people who are suffering. However, I feel like if I can't practice what I preach now—when I am in a comfortable surrounding with
nothing to lose if I try to help right at home—then how am I going to fare once I am thrown into the boiling pot of suffering.

For Heather, being informed is one of the best things she can do right now. Her notion that suffering “will always take place” is consistent with Arendt’s work on compassion, evil, and politics. The concern with self—how something would impact me—is still a central concern. Arendt gives an opportunity for saying that the suffering of others is not about me (perhaps an obvious point, but one that is too often overlooked). She makes compassion apolitical and shifts focus to mutual public concerns. While I have critiqued how far Arendt takes people away from compassion, the move toward acting with others regardless of identifying them is a useful one for my students. Again, the notion that she should let the suffering of others shape her own identity is the privileged act, rather than donating money or identifying as directly with others as Doug suggests.

Lisa describes a change in how she thinks of suffering and compassion. It may seem basic to think that there are a wide variety of responses, but this new understanding can lead to a much more critical analysis of feelings and their creation. She says, “Before taking English 30 this year, I never looked very closely at all the different ways that people respond to distant suffering. What I’ve noticed, however, from taking this course, is that there truly are many different ways in which people will respond. Before I had always had the impression that it was mostly the same for everyone, but I’ve come to realize that it’s not.” Lisa goes on to list several responses, including watching television and disregarding what one sees as one response, being shocked by those who see terrible things but remaining numb, and finally being one of those who must act “at all costs.” She continues,

I think I find myself most in the first one. It is not that worldwide suffering has no impact on me; it’s just that I often am unable to see my place in fixing it. Regardless, after taking this course I find myself wanting to be more like those in the third category I described. In fact, I’m now even considering a career in law, perhaps defending the human rights of those who are suffering around the world.
The point here is not to make human rights activists out of all of my students, nor is it to congratulate myself on changing the thought process of a few students. There are plenty in the class who hopefully got a few writing skills out of it and did not really feel personally changed at all. The issue is that what some students may get out of a course like this is a change in their approach to compassion and feelings, still valuing compassion, but in a more critical way. The students are at least considering their own compassionate reactions in the classroom.

Devin describes a sense of apathy and vague discomfort while describing his economic position in relation to distant suffering:

> I know what it is to be comfortable. It is very easy for me to fall back on that and pretend that the horrible things that happen in the world both manmade and otherwise don’t exist. If I don’t like what the news is telling me I can flip the channel. Hell, there are six hundred others I could be watching instead. [...] I don’t want to be apathetic but I feel like society almost demands it of me.

In Devin’s blunt answer, I sense a strong assumption that sympathy and compassion are the answer. Devin implies that one must feel connected and emotionally attached to the suffering of others. This need for emotional attachment can make it easy to evade looking for other versions of connection that can lead to ethical assistance for others. Arendt’s suggestion that compassion makes people too close to each other, making action determined rather than free, reaches a boiling point with Devin’s case. When action is demanded by compassion, and that action is not comfortable for someone, then avoiding contact (even through media) is the logical response. In this case, appeals to compassion (in the sense of identifying with the pain of others) drives away potential help. Arendt also says that a focus on compassion implies that pain has to be felt as our own in order to act for the good of others, which is a sad state of affairs for people (although perhaps true at times). I believe that Arendt is basically correct and that instead of only focusing on changing felt responses from apathy to compassion, organizations and individuals should consider other types of feelings and relationships to connect people in these situations of disparate economic status and distant suffering.
David continues the focus on needing to feel the pain in one’s self, claiming, “Things look horrible in pictures, but we really don’t take pictures too seriously because they don’t tell the whole story. [. . .] It is hard to take my mind off of my own stresses for two seconds to deal with someone else’s. I think that it may be unhealthy to try and help others in order to cope with one’s own problems” (8 Dec.). He makes a good observation about the tendency of some to help others in order to feel good about themselves, but he continues to assume that the main affective response involves feeling the pain of others.

Some students took the notion of identifying with the pain of others even further. They wrote documents where they played the roles of a Bosnian boy in a war zone or as women in Africa. These role-playing texts created individuals who were defined by their suffering, and who allowed changed affective responses to them, and who could connect in ways other than through feeling their suffering. However, these papers still are still exercises in feeling the position (and to some degree the pain) of a distant other. Jessie titles her piece, “Ajdin’s Story: The Account of a Young Bosnian Boy in the Midst of War.” In it she writes a series of letters from a young boy in Bosnia during the fighting there in the 1990s. She did prepare for it by interviewing a friend who had lived through that situation, and wrote with an interest in how war molds a child. Hers is a more complex attempt to identify with someone else than most attempts to evoke compassion or feel the suffering of another, but it continues to make changing into someone who identifies with others as the goal. Critical compassion can note the issues of appropriating the stories of others and question the need to actually feel like the other.

I want to conclude with one of the most compelling responses I received toward the end of the “Rhetoric of Suffering” class. Doug wrote a paper called, “Is It Just Apathy?” In his cover letter to that document he explained, “I have decided to write an essay discussing why I feel that I, and many others in our society, have a difficulty forming a connection with and an understanding about many of the horrible things that take place in our world.” He assumes the societal value of an emotive connection with the suffering of others, but he questions this value later. He starts by describing some family conversations after September 11:
My response, more or less, went like this: “Well, I mean, it’s a horrible thing to have happened, but I’m not really shedding tears about it. I dunno, it kind of doesn’t really matter that much to me.”

“Do you care about what happened at all, Doug?” were most likely my mother’s next words.

“I’ll help out and all when we do stuff at school mom, but it just can’t matter all that much to me; it didn’t affect me at all.”

This was then always followed by a somewhat heated discussion where I was told that 9-11 would in fact affect me and that I was just selfish, which I challenged by suggesting that I simply have a cold heart and am entirely apathetic.

As heartless as it may seem, this is how I feel towards many things that are in the same category as the World Trade Center attacks. That probably isn’t very hard to figure out about me, seeing that something as close as New York City didn’t even have any great effect on me. Take something as recent as New Orleans, for example. Is it horrible what happened there due to Hurricane Katrina? Sure it is. Do they need lots of help and rebuilding down there? Yes. Does it affect me much more than that? Sorry, but no, it doesn’t. The sad thing is that I have a problem caring, the truly sad part is that I suspect—correction—I know that I am not the only person who feels the same way. In fact, I would feel confident saying that I am only one of many.

I will not pretend to be able to psychoanalyze Doug, but I see a conflict in the writing between thinking his feelings of apathy (with a willingness to help) are fine, and with feeling that it is sad or even wrong not to feel care toward those in New Orleans, for example. Doug goes on to talk about a situation with some homeless people where he does feel empathy and care, and suggests that because he was involved, he had those feelings. In this case, the actions come before the feelings, rather than feelings of compassion being the catalyst for other actions. In any case, Doug has learned to provide a fairly thorough analysis of his affective responses to situations of suffering, and he has started looking at some of the various causes in what could be his own affective map.

He concludes by asserting that we need people to “begin getting involved for the sake of helping and not because you truly care.” Finding motivations and actions before feelings of compassion can then give a connection and can lead to compassion—which he seems to think should
happen eventually as a moral good. Perhaps the desired change is not so much to feel compassion toward others, or even to shift your view of a place from recipient to donor, but rather to find bases for connection and aid that do not rely on compassion for or identification with others.

The thoughts and feelings that my students present support Arendt in that images that powerfully evoke feelings of compassion tend to either force action out of them or leave them with a sensation of guilt and impotence. Nevertheless, the students also hint at a notion of compassion that is not so all-consuming or overwhelming. When compassion can clearly be one of numerous motivating factors, and can be thought of even as a strategy, a person can still have room to act with a level of freedom. My students were consistently concerned with the power to imagine connections with others—particularly when analyzing authors who tried to create feelings of closeness to distant others. Compassion filled with imagination or creativity—an act or composition that (even joyfully) breaks beyond the restrictions of need and necessity—has the possibility of aiding others and establishing new grounds for relationship. My most hopeful students understood compassion more as a creative action with somewhat unforeseen results rather than as an overwhelming sense of pain for the suffering of others. While still very broad, this creative definition of compassion may be valuable for helping us imagine new ways to teach and write ethically about the suffering of others.

*Pennsylvania State University*
*University Park, Pennsylvania*

**Notes**

1. Arendt consistently uses the term “man” for people and the masculine form of pronouns in her work. I have left all quotes as they appear in her writing.

2. For an analysis of the “Eichmann Controversy” among the New York intellectual community in 1963, see Rabinbach.

3. For Arendt, action is something that happens in the public realm and is characterized best by its “natality” or tendency to create new beginnings. In this, it cannot be forced by some sort of necessity (such as physical or material needs). Arendt’s definition of action then involves a free actor, and the action is often
some sort of "excellent" speech in the public arena. See Arendt in *The Human Condition*, particularly 175–81.

4. Compassion is one of many things that can take over the political space according to Arendt. Feeling for those living in poverty tends to trump other conversation. She wants to keep these forces that trump conversation out of political language in the public sphere. Much of my greater valuation of compassion than Arendt comes from what is perhaps my main disagreement with her over the public sphere. I see the ideal space as one not that avoids having these issues that trump all others, but as a space where poverty, religion, ethnic identity, or other issues that Arendt might find limiting to conversation can be included in, but not take over the discussion. Both visions, of course, have their own idealistic attributes and difficulties.

5. The articles for this issue of *Politics and Culture* can be viewed at http://aspen.conncoll.edu/politicsandculture/arts.cfm?id=57.

**Works Cited**


